Cyclamen purpurascens

By Gary Davis

Most of us are familiar with *Cyclamen* as a houseplant, but there is one species that is a good plant for woodland gardens in our area. Most members of the genus are found in the Mediterranean region and are adapted to a summer dry, wet winter climate. These species go dormant in the summer then flower and leaf out in fall and winter. To the right is *C. graecum* under an olive tree at Mycenae on September 25.

C. *purpurascens*, in contrast, grows in the Alps and Balkans where the climate is more similar to ours, with summer rain and cold winters. It tends to be evergreen year round and flowers in mid to late summer. I've been growing this species with some success for several years and a number of other local gardeners have also had luck. Mike Heger reports that three forms of the species have been doing well in his Zone 4 garden in east-central Minnesota. The plant has been spreading for decades in Tom Horner's garden near Waterford. He even finds seedlings in adjoining woods, though they're too modest in stature and slow in growth to be an invasion force. The shot below is from Tom's garden in August.

Cyclamen is in the Primrose family and was recently assigned to the subfamily Myrsinoideae which it shares with another genus we grow, *Lysimachia*.

The plants form a tuber from a modified stem. It serves as a storage organ to carry the plant through adverse conditions. The name of the genus comes from a Greek word for circle which may refer to this tuber. Short stems with leaves and flowers sprout directly from the top of the tuber, while roots arise from the sides and base.

The flowers form on coiled stems which unwind to raise the flower above the leaves. This coil might also be the inspiration for the name Cyclamen. Fully uncoiled, the stem develops a hook below the bud which orients the flower's reproductive parts downward as a protection from weather. The five petals reflex upward in a display for pollinators. The flowers of another primrose relative we grow, *Dodecatheon (*now *Primula),* behave similarly.

After pollination, the stem recoils to carry the developing seeds back down to the soil surface. In the picture above you can see a bud about to open and a stem starting to rewind with its seed pod. The seeds don't ripen until the following summer. When the pod splits open, the seeds lie in wait for ants to be attracted to a sweet coating and to carry them off to a new location for germination. New leaves also appear with the flowering.

The attractive variegation found on the leaves of most Cyclamen species is of a type termed blister or reflective. The silvery areas are due to reflection of light by pockets of air between the outer surface (epidermis) and the green pigmented layer of the leaf. Perhaps this reflection protects tissues from excessive sun, though why it should take intricate patterns is unclear.

Growing *Cyclamen purpurascens*

The species is predominantly found in woodlands, but it can also tolerate sunnier conditions. As with many plants, the ideal exposure is morning sun and afternoon shade. The species grows natively in slightly alkaline, limestone soils, and these are common in southern Wisconsin. The tubers should be planted shallowly, no more than an inch below the surface, and in soil that is very well drained. Tom Horner has given starts to a number of people and he found that failure with them could usually be traced to poor drainage.

Since the anthers ripen before the stigma the plants are self-infertile. If you want seedlings you need more than one tuber. Tom also reports that excessive mulch can suppress seeding.

I first planted some tubers five years ago. I chose a shady site with woodsy soil and dug in a lot of sand for drainage. Unfortunately, a tree came down and the site is now blasted by the midday sun. Not the ideal situation, but the plants are surviving if not always behaving as they should. The foliage does persist through the winter and, at least with the light snow covering we've had, comes through in spring still looking healthy. In the early summer of 2022, the foliage all died back, which is not the normal behavior of the species. But later in summer the foliage returned and the flowers appeared, which demonstrates the resilience of the species and its *Cyclamen* inheritance. In the summer of 2023, which was especially dry, I watered and the foliage for most plants persisted through the season.

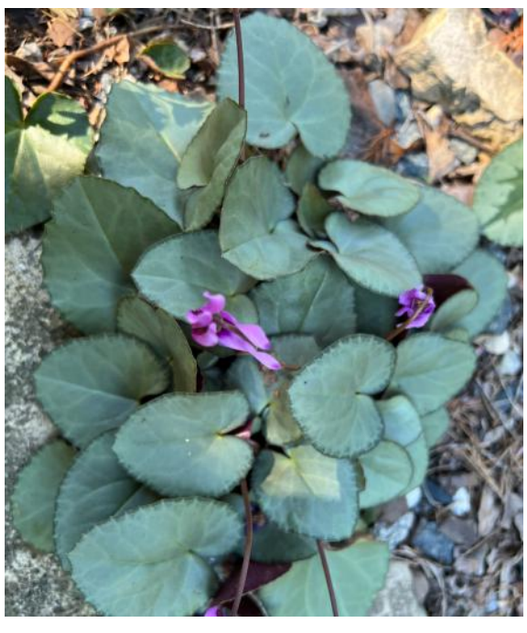
Some are in bloom by July 15.

There’s still some bloom on October 13. Here you can see a variety of leaf types. It’s interesting that the solid green type, which presumably lacks the air pockets, hasn’t been as vigorous for me.

This is a variety from Lake Garda. Unlike the other varieties nearby, it defoliated in late spring and I thought it had died. But on August 21 a few flowers appeared and by the 26th, some leaves were sprouting. It's in the sunniest spot, which may be why it's behaving like the majority of *Cyclamen* species.

This is a second year plant of another variety growing in much better woodland conditions. It survived being tossed aside a couple times by turkeys.

Closeups of some leaf variants.



When the temperature dropped into the low teens the variegation seemed to disappear, perhaps because the air pockets shrank. But a few days later, when the temps reached 30 degrees, the leaves were back to normal.

A few seedlings started to appear after two years. These are in their second year of growth. I've seen a couple of small seedlings elsewhere but they're doing best here along the concrete border. Perhaps the ants run along there or the plants enjoy the crevice like conditions.

Sources

A scattering of nurseries carry some *C*. *purpurascens*, but the best by far is Edelweiss Perennials. The leaf variants I have all came from there. They also offer a couple of other species that are claimed to be hardy in Zone 5 or 4. These are *C*. *coum* and *C*. *hederifolium*. I and a few other local gardeners have tried the latter species. It might hang on for a few years, but doesn't thrive and eventually disappears.

Conclusion

C. *purpurascens* is a species well worth trying. The flowers are colorful and fragrant. The foliage can be quite appealing on its own and can persist year round. For best results they may require a special spot: shady, at least from noon on, but also open and well drained. Because of their small stature they may be best displayed at edges, with other modest items or with rocks.

The plants can reportedly be long-lived and can seed modestly to form attractive patches. It's fun to follow the seedlings to see what leaf and flower variations they exhibit.

I've never seen any disease or predation on the plants. I've read that squirrels may go for the tubers, but my locals have not been interested and the tubers are reportedly poisonous, for humans at least.

Even if you don't have ideal conditions for the species, it might be a interesting adventure to test one as a summer deciduous item, perhaps the variety from Lake Garda.